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No. 05-1373

FILED
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SUPREME COURT, U.S.

IN THE

Supreme Court of the United States

JOYCE ANN DABISH,

Petitioner,

v.

DAIMLERCHRYSLER CORPORATION, INTERNATIONAL UNION, UNITED AUTOMOBILE, AEROSPACE AND AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENT WORKERS OF AMERICA; STERLING STAMPING PLANT; UNITED AUTOMOBILE WORKERS LOCAL 1264,

Respondents.

ON PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE SIXTH CIRCUIT

BRIEF IN OPPOSITION FOR RESPONDENT DAIMLERCHRYSLER CORPORATION

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

Did the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals properly deny Plaintiff's motion to remand the lawsuit to the District Court?

CORPORATE DISCLOSURE STATEMENT PURSUANT TO SUPREME COURT RULE 29.6

Respondent DaimlerChrysler Corporation, a Delaware Company, is a wholly owned subsidiary of DaimlerChrysler Motors Company LLC, a Delaware company, which is a wholly owned subsidiary of DaimlerChrysler North America Holding Corporation, a Delaware company, which is a wholly owned subsidiary of DaimlerChrysler AG, a German Corporation whose stock is publicly traded.

DaimlerChrysler AG owns all of the stock of DaimlerChrysler North America Holding Corporation, which is the sole member of DaimlerChrysler Motors Company, LLC, which owns all of the stock of DaimlerChrysler Corporation.

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OPINIONS BELOW

The September 19, 2005 Order of the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit is unreported, and is attached hereto as page 1a of the Appendix to the Brief in Opposition to the Writ of Certiorari. The Order of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan dated May 25, 2005 is unreported and is attached hereto as pages 2a-5a of the Appendix. The Order of the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit dated April 13, 2005 is unreported and is attached hereto as page 6a of the Appendix. The Order of the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit dated February 9, 2005 is unreported and attached hereto as pages 7a-8a of the Appendix. The Opinion and Order of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan dated March 31, 2004 is unreported and attached hereto as pages 9a-32a of the Appendix. The Judgment of the District Court dated March 31, 2004 is unreported and attached hereto as page 33a of the Appendix.

JURISDICTIONAL STATEMENT

This Court has jurisdiction pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1254(1). The Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals issued its last decision on September 19, 2005. Plaintiff's Petition for Writ of Certiorari was filed on December 16, 2005, and docketed on April 28, 2006.[1]

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1. The Petition was returned several times to correct deficiencies.

RULES INVOLVED

Rule 60(b) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure [**Relief from Judgment or Order**] provides:

> **(b) Mistakes; Inadvertence; Excusable Neglect; Newly Discovered Evidence; Fraud, etc.** On motion and upon such terms as are just, the court may relieve a party or a party's legal representative from a final judgment, order, or proceeding for the following reasons: (1) mistake, inadvertence, surprise, or excusable neglect; (2) newly discovered evidence which by due diligence could not have been discovered in time to move for a new trial under Rule 59(b); (3) fraud (whether heretofore denominated intrinsic or extrinsic), misrepresentation, or other misconduct of an adverse party; (4) the judgment is void; (5) the judgment has been satisfied, released, or discharged, or a prior judgment upon which it is based has been reversed or otherwise vacated, or it is no longer equitable that the judgment should have prospective application; or (6) any other reason justifying relief from the operation of the judgment. The motion shall be made within a reasonable time, and for reasons (1), (2), and (3) not more than one year after the judgment, order, or proceeding was entered or taken. A motion under this subdivision (b) does not affect the finality of a judgment or suspend its operation. This rule does not limit the power of a court to entertain an independent action to relieve a party from a judgment, order, or proceeding, or to grant relief to a defendant not actually personally

> notified as provided in Title 28, U.S.C., § 1655, or to set aside a judgment of fraud upon the court. Writs of coram nobis, coram vobis, audita querela, and bills of review and bills in the nature of a bill of review, are abolished, and the procedure for obtaining any relief from a judgment shall be by motion as prescribed in these rules or by an independent action.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Plaintiff Petitioner Joyce Dabish ("Plaintiff") filed the underlying lawsuit against Defendant Appellee Daimler Chrysler ("Defendant"), and the UAW, *pro se* on June 26, 2002. Plaintiff subsequently retained legal counsel, who thereafter filed a First Amended Complaint on October 21, 2002, alleging Breach of Contract against DaimlerChrysler (Count I), Breach of Fiduciary Duty against DaimlerChrysler under ERISA (Count II), Breach of Contract and Breach of Fiduciary Duty against the UAW (Count III) under Section 301 of the LMRA and ERISA, and Wrongful Termination Against Public Policy against DaimlerChrysler under Michigan common law (Count IV).

In her suit, Plaintiff alleged that she was wrongfully terminated from employment in 2002 when Defendant accepted, and honored, her written acceptance of retirement pursuant to an Incentive Program for Retirement (IPR) offered to Plaintiff and hundreds of other employees at the DaimlerChrysler Plant where Plaintiff worked. The IPR clearly and unambiguously stated that an employee's acceptance of retirement under the IPR was "irrevocable."

Plaintiff's deposition was taken by Defendant DaimlerChrysler on December 5, 2002. No other discovery was conducted, and discovery closed on January 31, 2003. Defendant DaimlerChrysler filed a Motion for Summary Judgment on February 28, 2003. Defendant UAW filed a Motion for Summary Judgment on March 4, 2003. By Opinion and Order dated March 31, 2004, the District Court granted Defendants' Motions, and dismissed the case. Judgment was also entered on March 31, 2004. Appx. pp. 9a-33a. It should be noted that Plaintiff, in her Writ herein, changed the date of the District Court's Opinion and Order by typing in the date of "**May 31**, 2004," which is clearly incorrect, and improper.

In her appeal to the Sixth Circuit from the judgment of the District Court, Plaintiff moved to remand the case to the District Court on the grounds that she had received inadequate legal counsel. The Sixth Circuit ruled that "there is no Sixth Amendment right to counsel in a civil case," citing *Father & Sons Lumber & Supplies, Inc. v. NLRB*, 931 F.2d 1093, 1097 (6th Cir. 1991). Nor could Plaintiff obtain counsel under the Fifth Amendment in the absence of government-initiated action. The Sixth Circuit therefore denied Plaintiff's motion to remand by Order dated February 9, 2005. Appx. p. 7a.

Plaintiff thereafter filed a motion for reconsideration of the Sixth Circuit's February 9, 2005 Order, again seeking remand to the District Court in order to conduct discovery and obtain additional evidence. By Order dated April 13, 2005, the Court ruled that "A party seeking to have a district court vacate its decision while the case is on appeal must initially file a Federal Rule of Civil Procedure Rule 60(b)

motion in the district court," citing *Bovee v. Coopers & Lybrand C.P.A.*, 272 F.3d 356, 359 n.1 (6th Cir. 2001); *First Nat'l Bank v. Hirsch*, 535 F.2d 343, 346 (6th Cir. 1976). The Court noted that Plaintiff "has not followed this procedure," and again denied her Motion. Appx. p. 6a.

On or about May 11, 2005, Plaintiff filed her alleged Rule 60 (b) Motion to Remand with the District Court. The District Court denied the Motion on May 25, 2005, ruling that not only was Plaintiff's Motion untimely, but it had no merit under Rule 60(b). Appx. p. 2a. On June 15, 2005, Plaintiff appealed that decision back to the Sixth Circuit, which appeal remains pending.

In the interim, on September 19, 2005, the Sixth Circuit denied a third motion from Plaintiff seeking to remand to the District Court on the basis that she received inadequate legal representation. In denying the Motion, the Court placed Plaintiff on notice that she would be subject to sanctions if she raised this issue again. Appx. p. 1a.

Plaintiff has now filed a Petition for Writ of Certiorari, challenging the Sixth Circuit's alleged failure to inform her in February 2005 that, in order to remand the case, she needed to file a Rule 60(b) Motion with the District Court. Plaintiff takes issue with the allegedly dilatory notice of this fact from the Sixth Circuit, as it caused her to miss the one year deadline for filing a Rule 60(b) motion after the judgment was entered on March 31, 2004, which, she contends, denied her due process.

REASONS FOR DENYING THE PETITION

Plaintiff's Petition for Writ of Certiorari places Defendant in the unique position of having to defend the decisions of the Sixth Circuit issued in this case in 2005. Plaintiff's Writ does not take issue with any action of Defendant pertaining to her former employment, nor does she contest the initial ruling of the District Court which granted Summary Judgment on the merits to Defendant in March 2004. Plaintiff's Writ can best be described as a procedural challenge to the way in which the Sixth Circuit denied her various motions and appeals to remand her lawsuit to the District Court. Specifically, in her Petition for Writ of Certiorari, Plaintiff sets forth four (4) "Questions Presented For Review," each of which is essentially a different version or re-statement of Plaintiff's singular argument, that the Sixth Circuit allegedly denied Plaintiff "due process" by not informing her in its February 9, 2005 Order that, to properly seek a remand of her lawsuit back to the District Court, she must file a Rule 60(b) Motion with the District Court. The crux of Plaintiff's complaint herein is that the Sixth Circuit waited until April 13, 2005 to inform her that she needed to file said Motion,[2] approximately two weeks after the one year deadline for filing said motions had expired.

Plaintiff has no legal basis for her Petition. There is no case law, court rule or other authority requiring a federal appeals court to specifically inform a party, even a *pro se* plaintiff, of the applicable court rules or the procedures available for remanding a civil action to the District Court. *Pro se* litigants are not excused from knowing or following

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2. Plaintiff did not attach to her Writ a copy of either the February or April 2005 Opinions.

the applicable court rules. Although *pro se* litigants are generally held to a less stringent standard than attorneys, requiring a litigant to comply with the court rules does not deprive her of her right of access to the courts. *Abou-Sakher v. McCoy*, 2000 U.S. App. LEXIS 26060 (6th Cir. 2000), relying on *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520, 92 S. Ct. 594, 30 L. Ed. 2d 652 (1971). *See also, Fields v. County of Lapeer*, 2000 U.S. App. LEXIS 29182 (6th Cir. 2000), citing *Brandenburg v. Beaman*, 632 F.2d 120, 122 (10th Cir. 1980) ("it is incumbent on litigants, even those proceeding *pro se*, to follow the . . . rules of procedure."). Plaintiff would not have been denied "due process," as she claims, had she followed the court rules. *Id.*

In addition, Plaintiff has retained the right, throughout all of this litigation, to hire a lawyer familiar with the court system, including appeals and procedures for post-judgment relief. Moreover, Plaintiff is hardly a novice to civil litigation, and has been filing pleadings *pro se* with various courts, including this one, for several years. *Dabish v. Chrysler Corp.*, 498 U.S. 1042, 111 S. Ct. 716, 112 L. Ed. 2d 705 (1991); *Dabish v. Chrysler Corp.*, 498 U.S. 944, 111 S. Ct. 356, 112 L. Ed. 2d 319 (1990); *Dabish v. Chrysler Motors Corp.*, 498 U.S. 802, 111 S. Ct. 29, 112 L. Ed. 2d 8 (1990); *Dabish v. DaimlerChrysler Corporation*, 902 F.2d 32 (6th Cir. 1990); *Dabish v. Merit Systems Protection Board*, 746 F.2d 1491 (Fed. Cir. 1984). Defendant, therefore, is entitled to presume that Plaintiff possessed at least a working knowledge of the applicable court rules.[3]

No compelling reasons exist for granting the Petition for Writ of Certiorari. The case presents no unique issues of

3. Plaintiff is college-educated.

fact or law and no issues of "first impression." Nor does there exist any conflict with decisions of this Court, with the Sixth Circuit or other Courts of Appeal, or even between the District Court and the Sixth Circuit, that would require resolution by this Court. While Plaintiff is unhappy with the legal representation she received in the lower court proceedings, and presumably unhappy with the judgment of the District Court dismissing her case, a mere unfavorable result is not subject to appeal in the federal courts, and provides no compelling reason to grant Plaintiff's Petition for Writ of Certiorari. Plaintiff's underlying claims of wrongful discharge have already been litigated and decided on the merits, and she presents no legitimate or compelling reason now to revisit those claims. The Sixth Circuit did not deny Plaintiff due process, nor did it abuse its discretion by issuing its February 9, 2005 Order. Plaintiff has no viable claim for relief under the Sixth Amendment to the Constitution, where the Amendment applies only to criminal cases.

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, Defendant and Respondent, DaimlerChrysler Corporation, respectfully requests the Petition for Writ of Certiorari be denied.

Respectfully submitted,

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A — ORDER OF THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE SIXTH CIRCUIT FILED SEPTEMBER 19, 2005

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE SIXTH CIRCUIT

No. 04-1583

JOYCE ANNE DABISH,

Plaintiff-Appellant,

v.

DAIMLERCHRYSLER CORPORATION; INTERNATIONAL UNION, UNITED AUTOMOBILE, AEROSPACE AND AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENT WORKERS OF AMERICA; STERLING STAMPING PLANT UNITED AUTOMOBILE WORKERS LOCAL 1264,

Defendants-Appellees.

Before: KENNEDY, CLAY, and GIBBONS, Circuit Judges.

Joyce Anne Dabish again moves to remand her appeal in this labor law case because she received ineffective representation from her counsel. As this court has previously stated, there are no Fifth or Sixth Amendment rights to effective counsel in a civil case such as this one. *Father & Sons Lumber & Bldg. Supplies, Inc. v. NLRB*, 931 F.2d 1093, 1097 (6th Cir. 1991). The motion to remand is denied. Dabish is warned that if she raises this issue again she will be subject to sanctions. *See* Fed. R. App. P. 38.

Appendix A

Dabish received a six-month extension of time in which to file her brief due to illness. Dabish's motion shows that she has now recovered sufficiently to be able to file her brief. The clerk's office is directed to establish a briefing schedule.

ENTERED BY ORDER OF THE COURT

s/ Leonard Grunji
Clerk

APPENDIX B — ORDER OF THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN, SOUTHERN DIVISION DENYING PLAINTIFF'S MOTION TO REMAND DATED MAY 25, 2005

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
SOUTHERN DIVISION

Case No. 02-72659
Hon. Gerald E. Rosen

JOYCE ANNE DABISH,

Plaintiff,

v.

DAIMLERCHRYSLER CORPORATION, INTERNATIONAL UNION, UNITED AUTOMOBILE, AEROSPACE, AND AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENT WORKERS OF AMERICA, and STERLING STAMPING PLANT UNITED AUTOMOBILE WORKERS LOCAL 1264,

Defendants.

ORDER DENYING
PLAINTIFF'S MOTION TO REMAND

At a session of said Court, held in the U.S. Courthouse, Detroit, Michigan on *May 25, 2005*

PRESENT: Honorable Gerald E. Rosen
United States District Judge

Appendix B

In an opinion and order and accompanying judgment dated March 31, 2004, the Court granted Defendants' motions for summary judgment and dismissed this case. Plaintiff subsequently appealed this ruling to the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, and this appeal remains pending. Recently, Plaintiff requested that the Sixth Circuit "remand" the case back to this Court, apparently so that she can pursue additional discovery that, in her view, her attorney neglected to seek while the district court litigation was pending. The Sixth Circuit denied this motion, as well as a subsequent motion for reconsideration, holding that Plaintiff could not abandon her appeal and resume the district court litigation without first persuading this Court to vacate its summary judgment decision via a motion under Fed. R. Civ. P. 60(b).

In an apparent effort to heed the Sixth Circuit's instructions, Plaintiff has filed a May 11, 2005 motion requesting that this Court "remand" this case from the Court of Appeals. In essence, Plaintiff seemingly wishes to resume the litigation in this Court, evidently so that she can conduct further discovery in support of her claims. Unfortunately, despite the Sixth Circuit's instructions in its two recent orders, Plaintiff has failed to suggest why an award of Rule 60(b) relief might be warranted here, or even which subsection of this Rule might arguably apply.

Nonetheless, it is abundantly clear to this Court that no such relief can be awarded. The relevant clause of Rule 60(b) under the circumstances is subsection (1), which authorizes relief from a judgment that was the product of "mistake, inadvertence, surprise, or excusable neglect." Fed. R. Civ. P. 60(b)(1). More specifically, challenges to the adequacy of

an attorney's representation of a client typically are addressed under the "mistake" or "excusable neglect" clauses of Rule 60(b)(1). See *United States v. Reyes*, 307 F.3d 451, 456-58 (6th Cir. 2002); *McCurry v. Adventist Health System/Sunbelt, Inc.*, 298 F.3d 586, 593-95 (6th Cir. 2002); *FHC Equities, L.L.C. v. MBL Life Assurance Corp.*, 188 F.3d 678, 684-87 (6th Cir. 1999). Yet, these same decisions further establish that "clients must be held accountable for the acts and omissions of their attorneys," and that "out-and-out lawyer blunders—the type of action or inaction that leads to successful malpractice suits by the injured client—do not qualify as 'mistake' or 'excusable neglect' within the meaning of [Rule 60(b)(l)]." *McCurry*, 298 F.3d at 594-95 (internal quotation marks and citations omitted).

So far as can be gleaned from her motion and supporting documents, this is precisely the theory of relief advanced by Plaintiff—namely, that she should be given a second bite at the discovery apple because of the inadequate performance of her counsel while this case was pending before this Court. The courts have been unwilling to make an exception from the usual finality of judgments under these circumstances. *See McCurry*, 298 F.3d at 595. In addition, Plaintiffs request for relief under Rule 60(b)(1) is untimely, as her motion was filed more than one year after the entry of the Court's March 31, 2004 opinion and order and judgment. Consequently, the Court finds no basis for granting relief under Rule 60(b), and Plaintiff must pursue any challenges to this Court's rulings via her pending Sixth Circuit appeal.

Appendix B

For these reasons,

NOW, THEREFORE, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that Plaintiff's May 11, 2005 motion to remand is DENIED.

s/ Gerald E. Rosen
Gerald E. Rosen
United States District Judge

Dated: May 25, 2005

APPENDIX C — ORDER OF THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE SIXTH CIRCUIT FILED APRIL 13, 2005

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE SIXTH CIRCUIT

No. 04-1583

JOYCE ANNE DABISH,

Plaintiff-Appellant,

v.

DAIMLERCHRYSLER CORPORATION; INTERNATIONAL UNION, UNITED AUTOMOBILE, AEROSPACE AND AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENT WORKERS OF AMERICA; STERLING STAMPING PLANT UNITED AUTOMOBILE WORKERS LOCAL 1264,

Defendants-Appellees.

ORDER

Before: MERRITT, MOORE and GILMAN, Circuit Judges.

Joyce Anne Dabish moves the court to reconsider this court's order denying her motion to remand this case arising under labor law and ERISA.

In her motion to reconsider, Dabish requests a remand to obtain additional evidence. A party seeking to have a

district court vacate its decision while the case is on appeal must initially file a Federal Rule of Civil Procedure Rule 60(b) motion in the district court. *Bovee v. Coopers & Lybrand C.P.A.*, 272 F.3d 356, 359 n.1 (6th Cir. 2001); *First Nat'l Bank v. Hirsch*, 535 F.2d 343, 346 (6th Cir. 1976). If the district court is disposed to grant the motion, it may enter an order so indicating, and the party may then file a motion to remand in this court. *Id.* Dabish has not followed this procedure.

The motion to reconsider is denied.

ENTERED BY ORDER OF THE COURT

s/ Leonard Grunji
Clerk

APPENDIX D — ORDER OF THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE SIXTH CIRCUIT FILED FEBRUARY 9, 2005

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE SIXTH CIRCUIT

No. 04-1583

JOYCE ANNE DABISH,

Plaintiff-Appellant,

v.

DAIMLERCHRYSLER CORPORATION; INTERNATIONAL UNION, UNITED AUTOMOBILE, AEROSPACE AND AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENT WORKERS OF AMERICA; STERLING STAMPING PLANT UNITED AUTOMOBILE WORKERS: LOCAL 1264,

Defendants-Appellees.

ORDER

Before: MERRITT, MOORE, and GILMAN, Circuit Judges.

Joyce Anne Dabish appeals pro se a district court grant of summary judgment in favor of the defendants in this labor and ERISA case. 29 U.S.C. §§ 185 et seq. and 1001 et seq. Dabish has filed a motion to remand the case to the district court. Dabish claims that she did not receive adequate legal representation from her attorney in the district court, so a

remand is appropriate. DaimlerChrysler has filed a response to the motion, and Dabish has filed a reply to the response.

Concerning Dabish's argument about adequate legal representation, there is no Sixth Amendment right to counsel in a civil case. *Fathers & Sons Lumber & Supplies, Inc. v. NLRB*, 931 F.2d 1093, 1097 (6th Cir. 1991). Moreover, the Fifth Amendment right to effective assistance of counsel does not apply in civil cases except for deportation proceedings or other government-initiated actions. *Id.* Dabish's case does not involve a government-initiated action. Because Dabish has no right to effective assistance of counsel, her argument based on not receiving adequate legal representation lacks merit.

The motion to remand is denied. The clerk is directed to establish a briefing schedule.

ENTERED BY ORDER OF THE COURT

s/ Leonard Grunji
Clerk

APPENDIX E — OPINION AND ORDER OF THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN, SOUTHERN DIVISION GRANTING DEFENDANTS' MOTION FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT DATED MARCH 31, 2004

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
SOUTHERN DIVISION

Case No. 02-72659
Hon. Gerald E. Rosen

JOYCE ANNE DABISH,

Plaintiff,

v.

DAIMLERCHRYSLER CORPORATION, INTERNATIONAL UNION, UNITED AUTOMOBILE, AEROSPACE, AND AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENT WORKERS OF AMERICA, and STERLING STAMPING PLANT UNITED AUTOMOBILE WORKERS LOCAL 1264,

Defendants.

OPINION AND ORDER GRANTING DEFENDANTS' MOTIONS FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT

At a session of said Court, held in the U.S. Courthouse, Detroit, Michigan on *MAR 31 2004*

PRESENT: Honorable Gerald E. Rosen
United States District Judge

Appendix E

I. INTRODUCTION

Plaintiff Joyce Anne Dabish filed a *pro se* complaint with this Court on June 26, 2002, seeking to revoke her acceptance of an early retirement offer made by her employer, Defendant DaimlerChrysler Corporation, and negotiated by her collective bargaining representative, Defendant UAW Local 1264. In an October 21, 2002 first amended complaint filed on her behalf by her present counsel, Plaintiff advances claims under § 301 of the Labor Management Relations Act ("LMRA"), 29 U.S.C. § 185, the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 ("ERISA"), 29 U.S.C. § 1001 *et seq.*, and Michigan common law, all in an effort to rescind her apparent acceptance of DaimlerChrysler's early retirement offer.

By motions filed on February 28, 2003 and March 4, 2003, respectively, Defendants DaimlerChrysler and UAW Local 1264 now seek summary judgment in their favor on all of Plaintiff's claims, state and federal alike. In untimely responses filed on May 30, 2003 and June 2, 2003, Plaintiff concedes that she cannot pursue a state-law claim of wrongful termination in violation of public policy, where any such state-law claim surely would be preempted by federal labor law in light of Plaintiff's status as member of UAW Local 1264 whose employment with DaimlerChrysler was governed by a collective bargaining agreement. Nonetheless, Plaintiff contends that she has produced sufficient evidence in support of her breach-of-contract and ERISA claims, where she purportedly was told by union representatives that she could revoke her acceptance of the early retirement plan at any time up until she executed the final retirement paperwork.

Defendants filed reply briefs in further support of their motions on June 11 and 12, 2003.

Having reviewed the parties' submissions and the record as a whole, the Court finds that these materials sufficiently disclose the relevant allegations, facts, and legal arguments, and that oral argument would not significantly aid the decisional process. Accordingly, the Court will decide Defendants' motions "on the briefs." *See* Local Rule 7.1(e)(2), U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Michigan. This Opinion and Order sets forth the Court's rulings.

II. FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The pertinent facts of this case are relatively straightforward. Moreover, there is scant opportunity for dispute of these facts, where Plaintiff took no depositions, Defendants apparently deposed only Plaintiff herself, and the record otherwise consists almost entirely of materials related to the early retirement offer extended by Defendant DaimlerChrysler to certain of its hourly employees, including Plaintiff.

Plaintiff Joyce Anne Dabish has been employed by Defendant DaimlerChrysler Corporation since September of 1976, and was 61 years old at the time she commenced this suit. At all relevant times, Plaintiff worked as an hourly production worker at DaimlerChrysler's Sterling Stamping Plant in Sterling Heights, Michigan. The terms of Plaintiffs employment were governed by a collective bargaining agreement ("CBA") between DaimlerChrysler and the Defendant UAW.

Appendix E

In March of 2002, DaimlerChrysler promulgated an Incentive Program for Retirements ("IPR") for eligible union-represented hourly employees at several of the company's manufacturing facilities, including the Sterling Stamping Plant. The IPR was negotiated with the UAW as part of DaimlerChrysler's company-wide effort to reduce its work force through voluntary attrition. The IPR offered cash incentives and vehicle vouchers, but did not alter the pension or other benefits an employee otherwise would receive upon retirement.

The IPR was offered to employees in the form of a letter describing the program, which was captioned "2002 Incentive Program for Retirements Conditional Offer Letter." (First Amended Complaint, Ex. A.) The letter established a "conditional offer period from March 13, 2002 through March 28, 2002," during which the employee was required to sign and date the form to indicate his or her acceptance or rejection of the offer. (*Id.*) In the section to be signed by employees who accepted the offer, the letter stated:

> I hereby accept this conditional offer under the Incentive Program for Retirements. The effective date of my retirement will be April 30, 2002 unless a two-month extension of my retirement date is required by Management.
>
> I acknowledge that Management will make the final determination of my retirement date and may require a two-month extension of my retirement date to June 30, 2002.

Appendix E

I acknowledge that Management will make a final selection of separations to be accepted under this Program on the basis of corporate service.

I acknowledge that I have had reasonable time to consider this conditional offer, that I have been informed to discuss it with my attorney and/or financial advisor, and that my acceptance of this conditional offer is completely voluntary on my part and was in no way forced upon me by DaimlerChrysler Corporation,

I acknowledge that my election to separate under this Incentive Program for Retirements is irrevocable after March 28, 2002 by me or by others.

In January of 2002, Plaintiff attended a regular membership meeting of UAW Local 1264, and learned that an early retirement offer would be forthcoming. On January 24, 2002, she received an estimate of her benefits under the DaimlerChrysler-UAW pension plan. When Plaintiff arrived at work on March 13, 2002, she received a copy of the above-cited IPR letter, accompanied by a package of materials that further explained this early retirement offer and estimated the retirement benefits Plaintiff would receive if she accepted. These materials reiterated that "[i]f you accept this conditional offer, you must retire on the date indicated in your offer letter, subject to any determination by Management that an extension of that date is needed and also subject to any conditional terms that the application for retirement be accepted by Management as indicated in your conditional offer letter." (Plaintiff's Response, Ex. 3, IPR package at 2.)

Appendix E

On March 18, 2002, UAW Local 1264 conducted an informational meeting to "explain all options available to members who have received an I.P.R. package." (Plaintiff's Response, Ex. 4.) Because of a doctor's appointment, Plaintiff was unable to attend this meeting, but she was assured that she could contact her union representatives to address any questions she might have about the early retirement offer. Accordingly, on March 25, 2002, Plaintiff went to the Local 1264 office and met with two union benefit representatives, Tom Nizich and Kathy Scorpio-Butina.

This March 25, 2002 meeting is pivotal to Plaintiff's claims in this case. According to the complaint and the testimony at her deposition, Plaintiff had not yet signed her offer letter, and still had not made up her mind whether to accept the offer. Plaintiff testified that she asked Nizich and Scorpio-Butina, "If I sign this letter, and later on I decide that I can't go through with this retirement, can I still change my mind?" (Plaintiff's Dep. at 39.) According to Plaintiff, both Nizich and Scorpio-Butina assured her that "[y]ou have until the day you sign the final retirement papers to change your mind." *(Id.)* There was no discussion of the language of the IPR letter stating that an employee's acceptance was "irrevocable after March 28, 2002." Plaintiff signed the letter that same day, indicating her acceptance of the IPR offer.[1] She acknowledged at her deposition that she read the entire letter before she signed it, including the statement that her acceptance was "irrevocable." (Plaintiff's Dep. at 109, 112.)

1. To be accurate, the letter reflects a signature date of ***April*** 25, 2002. (*See* Complaint, Ex. A.) Plaintiff confirmed at her deposition, however, that this date is incorrect, and that she actually signed the letter on March 25, 2002 (*See* Plaintiff's Dep. at 35, 40.)

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On June 5, 2002, Morris Simms, DaimlerChrysler's Senior Manager for Human Resources at the Sterling Stamping Plant, approved Plaintiff's eligibility for the IPR offer, and established June 30, 2002 as her retirement date. That same day, however, Plaintiff submitted a letter to Alvin Davis, the supervisor of union relations at the plant, stating that "I do not wish to accept the retirement package" and "do not wish to retire on June 30, 2002." (Plaintiff's Response, Ex. 7.) On June 10, 2002, Plaintiff sent another letter to Davis, reiterating her desire to decline the early retirement offer and continue working. (Plaintiff's Response, Ex. 8.)

Following this initial correspondence, Plaintiff sent two additional letters to more senior UAW officials, stating that she had been told by Tom Nizich that "I could reverse my decision to retire by not signing the final retirement papers," but that Nizich now was "saying that the Company will force me to retire." (Plaintiff's Response, Ex. 9)[2] In response, Plaintiff received a June 20, 2002 letter from John Rudzinski, the International Benefit Representative for UAW's DaimlerChrysler Department, stating that the terms of the IPR were "totally different from a 'regular retirement.'" (Plaintiff's Response, Ex. 10.) In particular, Rudzinski explained:

> Under normal circumstances, an employee has the right to revoke their decision up till the last day

2. Plaintiff has produced a memo, apparently authored by Nizich, indicating that Plaintiff was one of seven employees represented by Local 1264 who sought to revoke their acceptance of the IPR offer. (*See* Plaintiff's Response, Ex. 11.)

> of the month prior to the commencement of retirement benefits.
>
> However, as stated just above your signature on your acceptance of the offer, your decision is irrevocable after March 28, 2002. Additionally, this was explained at the informational meetings held for anyone interested in the incentive offer.

(*Id.*)

When Plaintiff reported for work as usual on July 1, 2002, she was told that she was now considered a retired employee, and she was escorted from the facility. To date, Plaintiff apparently has never completed the paperwork necessary to begin collecting retirement benefits. Instead, on July 3, 2002, Plaintiff sent a letter to the President of UAW Local 1264 protesting her removal from active employment. (*See* Plaintiff's Response, Ex. 12.) When Local 1264 declined to pursue her grievance, Plaintiff sent a letter to UAW President Ron Gettelfinger appealing this decision. In a letter dated December 5, 2002, Gettelfinger denied this appeal, stating:

> Your appeal to this office postmarked September 12, 2002 has been considered. Your submission chronicles the circumstances surrounding your contention that you should be returned to active employment.
>
> Investigation reveals that a 2002 Incentive Program for Retirements was offered at the

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Sterling Stamping Plant with a conditional offer period from March 13, 2002 through March 28, 2002 for eligible represented hourly employees. Eligible employees received a letter explaining the offer in sufficient detail.

You have made your position the subject of an appeal to the Local Union Membership and the UAW National DaimlerChrysler Department. Unable to locate a violation of the agreement or a duty breached, both determined your appeal requires an interpretation of the agreement.

For the reasons cited above, the UAW International DaimlerChrysler Department has determined that the issues raised in your communications do not depict a violation of the Agreement; it requires an interpretation of the 2002 Incentive Program for Retirements Conditional Offer Letter. It is held that your election to separate under the Incentive Program for Retirements is irrevocable.

The UAW International DaimlerChrysler Department is responsible for negotiating and implementing the agreement and any supplement thereof. Because their interpretation is correct, I am ruling on this appeal pursuant to Article 33, Section 2(b) of the International Constitution.

The appeal is denied and there is no further appeal from this decision.

(Plaintiff's Response, Ex. 14.)

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On June 26, 2002, while she was still pursuing her remedies under the CBA, Plaintiff commenced this action by filing a terse two-page *pro se* complaint seeking reinstatement to active employment. She subsequently retained counsel, through whom she has filed a first amended complaint that more thoroughly presents her allegations and theories of recovery. Specifically, this amended pleading advances breach of contract and breach of fiduciary duty claims against DaimlerChrysler, the UAW, and UAW Local 1264, arising under § 301 of the Labor Management Relations Act ("LMRA"), 29 U.S.C. § 185, the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 ("ERISA"), 29 U.S.C. § 1001 *et seq.*, and Michigan common law. Although Plaintiff now concedes that she cannot pursue her state-law claim of wrongful discharge, she contends that she has produced sufficient evidence to sustain her federal theories of recovery.

III. ANALYSIS

A. The Standards Governing Defendants' Motions

Through their present motions, Defendants seek summary judgment in their favor pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 56. Under this Rule, summary judgment is proper "if the pleadings, depositions, answers to interrogatories, and admissions on file, together with the affidavits, if any, show that there is no genuine issue as to any material fact and that the moving party is entitled to judgment as a matter of law." Fed. R. Civ. P. 56(c). In this case, the record is limited and largely undisputed, resulting in a fairly straightforward Rule 56 inquiry. Accordingly, the Court now turns to this task.

B. Plaintiff Has Failed to Produce Evidence to Sustain Either Prong of Her Hybrid § 301 Claim.

As noted, Plaintiff has acknowledged that the state-law theory of recovery asserted in her first amended complaint is preempted by federal law—specifically, § 301 of the LMRA, 29 U.S.C. § 185—by virtue of Plaintiff's status as a member of UAW Local 1264 and the existence of a CBA between the union and her employer, DaimlerChrysler. Thus, to the extent that Plaintiff's claims rest upon an alleged breach of an obligation owed by her employer under the CBA or a related, collectively bargained agreement, they are governed by the standards of so-called "hybrid § 301" claims. As this Court previously has observed:

> It is well-settled that for a union employee to maintain an action for breach of a labor contract against his employer, he must also establish that his union breached its duty of fair representation. *Vaca v. Sipes*, 386 U.S. 171, 87 S.Ct. 903, 17 L.Ed.2d 842 (1967). Such a suit, as a formal matter, comprises two causes of action. The suit against the employer rests on § 301, since the employee is alleging a breach of the collective bargaining agreement. The suit against the union is one for breach of the union's duty of fair representation. *Vaca v. Sipes*, *supra*; *DelCostello v. International Brotherhood of Teamsters*, 462 U.S. 151, 103 S.Ct. 2281, 76 L.Ed.2d 476 (1983). The two claims are inextricably interdependent: To prevail against either the company or the Union, the employee-plaintiff must not only show

> that his discharge was contrary to the contract but must also carry the burden of demonstrating a breach of duty by the Union. *Id.*, 103 S.Ct. at 2290-91. The employee may, if he chooses, sue one defendant and not the other; but the case he must prove is the same whether he sues one, the other, or both. *Id.* at 2291.

Cotter v. DaimlerChrysler Corp., 87 F. Supp.2d 746, 756 (E.D. Mich. 2000). Defendants argue, and the Court agrees, that Plaintiff cannot satisfy either prong of this standard.

First, regarding the breach-of-contract element of a hybrid § 301 claim, Plaintiff does not contend that DaimlerChrysler breached any provision of the underlying CBA. Rather, her claim rests upon the terms of the letter she signed on March 25, 2002, reflecting her apparent acceptance of the early retirement offer extended through Daimler Chrysler's 2002 Incentive Program for Retirements ("IPR"), Although the parties do not address the point, it is evident to the Court that the IPR, as an agreement negotiated between DaimlerChrysler and the UAW that supplements the underlying CBA, should be "treated in the same manner as the collective bargaining agreement" itself. *Cotter*, 87 F. Supp.2d at 757.[3] In particular, to determine whether the IPR was breached, the Court looks first to "the plain meaning

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3. Because of the applicability of § 301 standards to the CBA and the IPR alike, the parties' various citations to Michigan court decisions are not particularly helpful here. Given the parties' apparent agreement that federal law governs the terms of Plaintiff's relationship with her employer, the Court fails to see why it should look to rulings on Michigan contract law.

of the agreement." *Roeder v. American Postal Workers Union, AFL-CIO*, 180 F.3d 733, 737 (6th Cir. 1999).

If the terms of the IPR are defined solely by reference to the letter and accompanying written materials received by Plaintiff, it is clear that DaimlerChrysler did not breach this agreement by refusing to allow Plaintiff to rescind her acceptance of the early retirement offer, The letter signed by Plaintiff states in the plainest of terms that her acceptance was "***irrevocable after March 28, 2002*** by me or by others." (First Amended Complaint, Ex. A (emphasis added)) The accompanying materials are fully consistent with this provision, stating at one point that "[i]f you accept this conditional offer, you must retire on the date indicated in your offer letter," subject only to certain conditions imposed by management at its discretion. (Plaintiffs Response, Ex. 3, IPR package at 2.) Plaintiff acknowledges that she read the letter before signing it, and she does not contend that she was in any way coerced into accepting the offer of early retirement. Moreover, Plaintiff concedes that she did not attempt to revoke her acceptance until June 5, 2002, well after the March 28, 2002 cut-off date set forth in the letter.

Nonetheless, Plaintiff suggests two theories under which DaimlerChrysler could be deemed to have breached the early retirement agreement. First, she cites the various places, in both the letter and the accompanying materials, where the offer of early retirement is characterized as "conditional." The letter itself, for example, is captioned "2002 Incentive Program for Retirements Conditional Offer Letter." Plaintiff reasons that she was free to revoke her acceptance of this "conditional" offer until it was fully executed through the

completion of her final retirement paperwork. Yet, as DaimlerChrysler points out, the letter itself plainly discloses the conditions upon the offer of early retirement: (i) that "Management will make the final determination" of the employee's exact retirement date, choosing between April 30 and June 30, 2002; and (ii) that "Management will make a final selection of separations to be accepted under this Program on the basis of corporate service." (First Amended Complaint, Fix. A.) These conditions ran entirely in favor of the company—an employee's acceptance of the early retirement offer, in other words, was conditional upon management's authority to make the final selection of which employee offers to accept. Nothing in these conditions gave Plaintiff the power to rescind her acceptance after March 28, 2002.

Next, Plaintiff suggests that the terms of the IPR were modified by virtue of the assurances of two union benefit representatives, Tom Nizich and Kathy Scorpio-Butina, that she could revoke her acceptance at any time before she completed her final retirement paperwork. As an initial matter, Defendants correctly note the absence of any evidence that these two employees, who evidently did not hold any sort of management position, had the authority to bind DaimlerChrysler or modify the terms of the IPR through their oral representations to Plaintiff.[4]

4. Indeed, because Plaintiff did not take the depositions of these individuals, and has not otherwise addressed the extent of their authority to bind their employer or the union through their statements about the proper construction of the terms of the IPR, it is not clear as an evidentiary matter that their hearsay statements concerning Plaintiff's opportunity to revoke her acceptance would be admissible at trial. *Cf.* Fed. R. Evid. 801(d)(2)(D).

More importantly, federal labor law forecloses any possible recourse to an individual side agreement, whether written or oral, that is inconsistent with the terms of the underlying CBA. Plaintiff contends, in essence, that the verbal assurances of union representatives Nizich and Scorpio-Autina gave rise to an individual contractual right, over and above the terms of the IPR, to revoke her acceptance at any time before she completed her final retirement paperwork. Yet, "[a] collective bargaining agreement . . . supersedes an individual employment contract to the extent that they are inconsistent." *Loewen Group International, Inc. v. Haberichter*, 65 F.3d 1417, 1423 (7th Cir. 1995); *see also J.I. Case Co. v. N.L.R.B.*, 321 U.S. 332, 339, 64 S. Ct. 576, 581 (1943) (holding that "[i]ndividual contracts cannot subtract from collective ones"); *Maushund v. Earl C. Smith, Inc.*, 795 F.2d 589, 590 (6th Cir, 1986) ("The collective bargaining process prohibits [a represented employee] from engaging in separate negotiations with the company and precludes any actions to enforce such an agreement."); *cf. Wells v. General Motors Corp.*, 881 F.2d 166, 174 (5th Cir. 1989) (finding that state-law claims "founded upon contractual rights or common-law rights independent of those which the collectively-bargained agreement creates" are not preempted by the LMRA.). The inconsistency here could hardly be more pronounced—the acceptance given by other employees was irrevocable under the terms of the IPR letter, but Plaintiff remained free to revoke her acceptance under the individual agreement conferred upon her by Nizich and Scorpio-Butina. Plaintiff has cited no authority for the proposition that federal labor law would recognize such an individual agreement, in direct contravention of the collective deal struck on behalf of Plaintiff and her fellow union members by their designated bargaining representative.

A more promising avenue for Plaintiff, though one that she has failed to pursue in her submissions to the Court, rests upon the principle of estoppel. The Sixth Circuit has held that "[t]he equitable doctrines of estoppel and waiver are applicable in a section 301 action to enforce a labor contract." *Apponi v. Sunshine Biscuits, Inc.*, 809 F.2d 1210, 1217 (6th Cir. 1987). More recently, the Court confirmed that "[t]he federal common law of contract applicable under the LMRA includes the doctrine of promissory estoppel." *Anderson v. AT&T Corp.*, 147 F.3d 467, 477 (6th Cir. 1998). The Court has elaborated:

> The elements constituting estoppel, as defined by federal common law, are: (1) conduct or language amounting to a representation of material facts; (2) the party to be estopped must be aware of the true facts; (3) the party to be estopped must intend that the representation be acted on or act such that the party asserting the estoppel has a right to believe it so intended; (4) the party asserting the estoppel must be unaware of the true facts; and (5) the party asserting the estoppel must detrimentally and justifiably rely on the representation.

Apponi, 809 F.2d at 1217.

Plaintiff seemingly could establish at least some of these elements of a claim of estoppel. The statements allegedly made by union benefit representatives Nizich and Scorpio-Butina arguably qualify as representations of an undeniably material fact—namely, that Plaintiff could revoke her

acceptance of the early retirement offer at any time prior to her execution of the final retirement documents.[5] Next, in making these alleged statements, Nizich and Scorpio-Butina surely intended and understood that Plaintiff would use this information in her decision whether to accept the early retirement offer. Indeed, Plaintiff testified that she signed the IPR letter immediately after she was assured that she could still revoke her acceptance.

The evidence regarding the second prong of a claim of estoppel is somewhat more equivocal, however. The record is wholly silent as to Nizich's or Scorpio-Butina's awareness of the "true fact" that Plaintiff's acceptance was not revocable after March 28, 2002. One could presume, perhaps, that these union representatives surely must have known this fact, by virtue of the plain language of the IPR letter disclosing this information.[6] Yet, other evidence produced by Plaintiff herself casts doubt on this assumption. In particular, the June 20, 2002 letter received by Plaintiff from John Rudzinski, an International Benefit Representative for the UAW DaimlerChrysler Department, states that an employee's decision concerning a "regular retirement" is revocable "up till the last day of the month prior to the commencement of retirement benefits." (Plaintiff's Response, Ex. 10.) Thus, it

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5. Although these statements could also be construed as expressing a mere opinion—and not a particularly well-informed one, at that—the Court assumes for present purposes that they qualify as assertions of fact.

6. As discussed below, the self-evident nature of this fact might favor Plaintiff on this element of estoppel, but cuts sharply against her as to other elements.

is possible that Nizich and Scorpio-Butina responded to Plaintiff's inquiry by providing this "regular retirement" information, perhaps unaware that the IPR was governed by different rules. Moreover, while the Sixth Circuit has recognized that a speaker's "apparent authority" might "satisfy (or at least . . . stand in for) the awareness element" of a claim of estoppel, *Anderson*, 147 F.3d at 477, the Court already has noted the absence of evidence that Nizich or Scorpio-Butina had the authority to bind either the union or DaimlerChrysler through their statements about the terms of the IPR.

In any event, no reasonable trier of fact could conclude that Plaintiff has satisfied the fourth or fifth elements of an estoppel-based theory of recovery. Under the fourth prong, Plaintiff must show that she was "unaware of the true facts." Yet, she was expressly told, in the language of the IPR letter appearing directly above her signature, that her acceptance of the early retirement offer was "irrevocable after March 28, 2002." The Sixth Circuit has held that the "unawareness" element of a claim of estoppel encompasses both the facts actually known to a party and those which the party had the means to ascertain. *Trustees of Michigan Laborers' Health Care Fund v. Gibbons*, 209 F.3d 587, 593 (6th Cir. 2000). Even if Plaintiff did not actually read the IPR letter before she signed it—and she acknowledged otherwise at her deposition—she readily could have ascertained the deadline for revoking her acceptance, merely by noting the explicit and unambiguous disclosure of this deadline in the letter itself.

For similar reasons, Plaintiff cannot establish that she detrimentally and justifiably relied on the representations of Nizich and Scorpio-Rutina that she could revoke her acceptance beyond the March 28, 2002 deadline set forth in the IPR letter. In particular, while Plaintiff's deposition testimony indicates that she relied on these representations to her detriment, the evidence does not support a finding that this reliance was justified. In the analogous context of an ERISA-based claim of estoppel, the Sixth Circuit has emphasized that a "party's reliance can seldom, if ever, be reasonable or justifiable if it is inconsistent with the clear and unambiguous terms of plan documents available to or furnished to the party." *Sprague v. General Motors Corp.*, 133 F.3d 388, 404 (6th Or. 1998). The courts have adopted this reasoning in a number of other cases where the factual assertion purportedly relied upon is directly contradicted by the express, unambiguous terms of the parties' written agreement. *See, e.g., Gibbons*, 209 F.3d at 593-94; *Armbruster v. K-II Corp.*, 206 F. Supp.2d 870, 894 (E.D. Mich. 2002); *Easa v. Florists' Transworld Delivery Ass'n*, 5 F. Supp.2d 522, 526-27 (E.D. Mich. 1998). Again, the IPR letter here was direct and unambiguous in establishing a deadline of March 28, 2002 for revocation, and Plaintiff would not have been justified in relying on the alleged assertions of union representatives to the contrary. Accordingly, the Court finds that the record fails to support the breach-of-contract prong of Plaintiff's hybrid § 301 claim.

In addition, it appears doubtful that Plaintiff could establish the second prong of this claim, a breach of the union's duty of fair representation. "To meet [her] burden of proof as to the union's breach of its duty of fair representation,

a plaintiff must establish by substantial evidence that the union acted arbitrarily, discriminatorily or with bad faith." *Cotter*, 87 F. Supp.2d at 756. Regarding the alleged misstatements of union representatives Nizich and Scorpio-Rutina concerning Plaintiff's right to revoke her acceptance, the record indicates, at worst, that these statements rested upon a mistaken assumption that the "regular retirement" rules applied as well to the IPR. Such a mistaken judgment "would at most be negligence," and "[m]ere negligence is insufficient to establish a breach of the duty of fair representation," *Poole v. Budd Co.*, 706 F.2d 181, 184 (6th Cir. 1983). As for the union's decision not to pursue Plaintiff's grievance, the December 5, 2002 letter from UAW President Ron Gettelfinger sets forth the union's view that this grievance was based upon an interpretation of the IPR that the union deemed incorrect. These are "rational and objective grounds" for the union to decline to pursue Plaintiff's grievance, *Cotter*, 87 F. Supp.2d at 757, and therefore defeat any claim that the union acted arbitrarily, discriminatorily, or in bad faith in this matter.

C. Plaintiff Has Failed to State a Viable Claim under ERISA.

Having found no evidence to sustain a claim under § 301 of the LMRA, this leaves only Plaintiff's various ERISA-based theories of recovery. In support of their summary judgment motions, Defendants contend that ERISA does not reach the allegations made by Plaintiff in this case. The Court agrees.

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The reach of ERISA is undeniably broad, superseding "any and all State laws insofar as they may now or hereafter relate to any employee benefit plan." 29 U.S.C. § 1144(a). The IPR at issue here undoubtedly conferred "benefits" upon DaimlerChrysler employees, including a lump-sum severance payment and a credit toward the purchase or lease of a vehicle. Yet, in *Fort Halifax Packing Co. v. Coyne*, 482 U.S. 1, 107 S. Ct. 2211 (1987), the Supreme Court held that ERISA did not preempt a Maine statute mandating one-time severance payments to employees in the event of a plant closing, reasoning that such a one-time payment did not give rise to an ongoing administrative scheme that reasonably could be termed a "plan."

Based on the reasoning of *Fort Halifax* and other Supreme Court decisions addressing the preemptive scope of ERISA, the courts have held that claims involving early retirement programs are not governed by ERISA, absent a substantial link between the claim and an employee benefit plan. In *Wells v. General Motors Corp.*, 881 F.2d 166, 175-76 (5th Cir. 1989), for example, the Fifth Circuit relied on *Fort Halifax* in concluding that a voluntary termination program with severance pay was not an "employee benefit plan" within the meaning of ERISA. Accordingly, the Court found that ERISA did not preempt the plaintiffs' state-law claims that they had been fraudulently induced to accept this program.

Similarly, in *Forbus v. Sears Roebuck & Co.*, 30 F.3d 1402, 1405-06 (11th Cir. 1994), the Eleventh Circuit found that ERISA did not preempt a claim that an employer had fraudulently induced the plaintiff employees to accept a

retirement package by falsely stating that their facility was closing and their jobs would be eliminated. In so ruling, the Court distinguished prior cases in which employees had retired in reliance on false representations about the retirement benefits they would receive. *See Forbus*, 30 F.3d at 1406. The Court reasoned that the alleged misrepresentation in the case before it "did not involve a benefit plan—it involved the very existence of the plaintiffs' jobs." 30 F.3d at 1406. Nor was a finding of preemption warranted, in the Court's view, by the "mere fact that the plaintiffs' damages may be affected by a calculation of pension benefits." 30 F.3d at 1406-07.

This Court previously has reached a similar conclusion, albeit in the somewhat distinct context of "complete preemption." In *Hanks v. General Motors Corp.*, 26 F. Supp.2d 977, 978-79 (E.D. Mich. 1998), the plaintiff employee had been receiving workers' compensation benefits for a number of years, and then inquired of her employer, defendant General Motors, whether these benefits would be jeopardized if she began collecting benefits from her employer-sponsored pension plan. A General Motors employee assured the plaintiff that she could simultaneously receive both workers' compensation and pension benefits, and she began drawing pension benefits in reliance on this representation. A short time later, her workers' compensation benefits were terminated pursuant to a coordinated benefits clause in the governing insurance policy. The plaintiff then brought suit in state court, asserting claims of fraudulent and negligent misrepresentation.

General Motors removed the case to federal court, contending that the plaintiff's state-law claims were

completely preempted under ERISA. This Court remanded the case to state court, however, reasoning that the doctrine of complete preemption did not apply because the plaintiff was "not attempting to recover benefits due under the terms of" the General Motors pension plan. *Hanks*, 26 F. Supp.2d at 983. Rather, the plaintiff sought "to rescind her decision to draw [pension] benefits on the grounds that [her employer] allegedly made misrepresentations which led her to believe she was entitled to workers' compensation benefits ***in addition to*** the benefits due under the [pension plan] itself." 26 F. Supp.2d at 983. Thus, the Court found that the plaintiff's state-law claims "only tangentially implicate[d] the ERISA benefits plan" offered by her employer. 26 F. Supp.2d at 983.

Although *Hanks* addresses complete rather than ordinary preemption, it is entirely consistent with the above-cited decisions in recognizing that ERISA does not reach any and all claims that "tangentially implicate" an employee benefit plan. These rulings are fully applicable here, where the lump-sum payments promised under DaimlerChrysler's IPR did not give rise to an "employee benefit plan" governed by ERISA. Nor do Plaintiff's claims and allegations directly implicate the terms of any employee benefit plan offered by her employer; she does not assert, for example, that her acceptance of the IPR offer was based upon any sort of misrepresentation about the types or amounts of retirement benefits she would receive.

Indeed, Plaintiff has given no reason whatsoever for seeking to revoke her acceptance. Rather, she more broadly asserts that the period of revocation had not yet closed at the time she changed her mind, so that she was free to revoke

her acceptance for any reason whatsoever. As in *Forbus*, the alleged misrepresentation here concerns Plaintiff's right to continued employment, and not merely her right to a different level of benefits. Plaintiff seeks "to set aside and escape from the early retirement agreement, not to recover under it or to 'enforce' it or to assert rights to future benefits under the teens of the plan.'" *Warner v. Ford Motor Co.*, 46 F.3d 531, 534 (6th Cir. 1995) (holding, as in *Hanks*, that such a claim is not completely preempted under ERISA). Although Plaintiff's plea for damages might encompass benefits under various DaimlerChrysler plans, the above-cited cases hold, and Sixth Circuit precedent confirms, that this sort of indirect involvement, of an employee benefit plan does not trigger ERISA preemption. *See Wright v. General Motors Corp.*, 262 F.3d 610, 615 (6th Cir. 2001); *Forbus*, 30 F.3d at 1406-07. Consequently, the Court finds that ERISA affords no remedy in this case, and that Plaintiff's claims instead are governed by the standards of § 301 of the LMRA.

In any event, any such ERISA claim in this case would face considerable difficulty on the merits. Even if ERISA were deemed to govern the DaimlerChrysler IPR, ERISA plans, like CBAs, generally are resistant to attempts at oral modification. *See Sprague*, 133 F.3d at 402-03. Consequently, Plaintiff's best resort again would be to an estoppel-based theory of recovery. Yet, the Sixth Circuit has applied precisely the same five-part estoppel standard to claims under the LMRA and ERISA alike. *See Sprague*, 133 F.3d at 403-04; *Armistead v. Vernitron Corp.*, 944 F.2d 1287, 1298-1300 (6th Cir. 1991). Thus, in light of the unambiguous provisions of the IPR itself, a claim of estoppel here would fare no better under ERISA than under the LMRA. *See Sprague*, 133 F.3d at 404.

This leaves only Plaintiff's contention that Defendants breached a fiduciary duty owed under ERISA. As explained in *Sprague*, an employer may act "in a fiduciary capacity when it explain[s] its retirement program to [its] early retirees." *Sprague*, 133 F.3d at 405. This rule extends only to explanations of "plan benefits," however, *see Sprague*, 133 F.3d at 405, and hence is unavailing to Plaintiff in this case, where the Court already has concluded that the IPR does not qualify as a "plan" under ERISA.

Moreover, the Court previously has noted the complete absence of evidence that the individuals who purportedly explained the IPR to Plaintiff, Tom Nizich and Kathy Scorpio-Butina, had the authority to bind either Defendant through their statements. To be sure, the Court has little reason to doubt the assertion that individuals in the role of "union benefit representatives" have been granted the authority to answer the benefit questions of union members. Yet, such an assertion necessarily must rest upon ***some*** evidentiary foundation, and Plaintiff simply has failed to provide one here. Accordingly, Defendants are entitled to summary judgment in their favor on Plaintiffs ERISA-based theories of recovery.

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IV. CONCLUSION

For the reasons set forth above,

NOW, THEREFORE, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that Defendant DaimlerChrysler Corporation's February 28, 2003 Motion for Summary Judgment is GRANTED. IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that Defendant UAW Local 1264's March 4, 2003 Motion for Summary Judgment also is GRANTED.

s/ Gerald E. Rosen
Gerald E. Rosen
United States District Judge

APPENDIX F — JUDGMENT OF DISMISSAL OF THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN, SOUTHERN DIVISION DATED MARCH 31, 2004

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
SOUTHERN DIVISION

Case No. 02-72659
Hon. Gerald E. Rosen

JOYCE ANNE DABISH,

Plaintiff,

v.

DAIMLERCHRYSLER CORPORATION, INTERNATIONAL UNION, UNITED AUTOMOBILE, AEROSPACE, AND AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENT WORKERS OF AMERICA, and STERLING STAMPING PLANT UNITED AUTOMOBILE WORKERS LOCAL 1264,

Defendants.

JUDGMENT OF DISMISSAL

At a session of said Court, held in the U.S. Courthouse, Detroit, Michigan on *MAR 31 2004*

PRESENT: Honorable Gerald E. Rosen
United States District Judge

Appendix F

The Court having this day entered an Opinion and Order granting Defendants' Motions for Summary Judgment,

NOW, THEREFORE, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED, ADJUDGED, AND DECREED that this case be, and hereby is, DISMISSED.

s/ Gerald E. Rosen
Gerald E. Rosen
United States District Judge